

Committee on International Relations

Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats

Statement of Chairman Elton Gallegly

Northern Ireland: Prospects for the Peace Process

May 25, 2005

Today, the Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats is holding a hearing on recent developments and the prospects for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

Since 1969, over 3,200 have died in both communities as a result of terrorism and political violence in Northern Ireland. For years, the British and Irish governments, with the assistance of the United States, sought to facilitate a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Finally, in April of 1998, the long-warring Catholic and Protestant factions in Northern Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreement. Just over one month later, strong majorities in both the north and south of Ireland endorsed the Agreement in a referendum.

The Good Friday Agreement calls for the transfer of power from London to Belfast, and the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Committee in which unionists and nationalists share power. It also contains provisions on disarmament, reformed policing, human rights, prisoners, and demilitarization by British armed forces.

However, full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement remains difficult. The devolved Northern Ireland government has been suspended since October 2002 amid a loss of trust and confidence on both sides of the conflict. Unionists remain skeptical about the IRA's commitment to disarmament and non-violence. Nationalists worry about the pace of police reforms, demilitarization, and ongoing loyalist paramilitary activity.

I believe we are at another critical point in Northern Ireland. The November 2003 election for the Northern Ireland Assembly produced a

significant shift in the balance of power in favor of hardliners on both sides.

This trend was confirmed in the recent United Kingdom elections held earlier this month. In those elections, on the unionist side, the moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) lost five of its six seats in Parliament, while the anti-Good Friday Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) gained four seats and now hold a total of nine seats at Westminster. And David Trimble, one of the major participants in the peace process, has resigned as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

On the Catholic side, Sinn Fein, the IRA's associated political party picked up one seat from the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Sinn Fein members now has a five seat to three seat advantage over the SDLP in the UK Parliament

At the same time, the IRA has not fully disarmed and, by all accounts, is still engaged in criminal activity. Another concern of mine is the IRA's links with the FARC in Colombia and Castro's Cuba.

However, the failure to implement the Good Friday Agreement does not lie entirely with the IRA. Nationalists complain that devolution is preceding at a slow pace, especially with regard to law enforcement functions. In addition, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams asserts that there is a double standard between what is demanded of the IRA and what is demanded of Unionist paramilitary organizations in terms of putting weapons beyond use.

I look forward to hearing Ambassador Reiss's views on these developments and his overall perspective on how to get the peace process back on track.

I will now turn to Mr. Wexler for any opening statement he may wish to make.